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SUBJECT: WASIT UIA LEADER LINES UP BEHIND JA'AFARI

REF: HILLAH 24

CLASSIFIED BY: AFRED FONTENEAU, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REO,
AL-HILLAH, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. Mohammed Al-Khateeb, outgoing Wasit Deputy governor and future United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) representative in the Council of Representatives (CoR), predicted Prime Minister-designate Ja'afari would survive protracted coalition negotiations between the UIA and the Kurdish bloc. Al-Khateeb said that though he supported the idea of a national unity government, the Shia Islamist bloc must remain the dominant power in the government. Emboldened by his success in the December 15 elections, in which he was the number one candidate on the UIA list in Al-Khateeb has asserted himself as the leading Shi'a Islamist independent in Wasit. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (C) Deputy Governor Al-Khateeb, in a February 21 meeting at his office in Al-Kut with REO Al-Hillah staff, said the United Iraqi Alliance remained stable despite the controversy over the selection of Ibrahim Al-Ja'afari as the UIA candidate for Prime Minister. Al-Khateeb conceded that Adil Ad-Mehdi was widely seen as the better candidate for the post, but he insisted that Ja'afari would remain Prime Minister, though protracted negotiations both within the UIA and with coalition partners needed for a majority in CoR will be necessary. He described Sadrists support for Ja'afari as unreliable, but said independents within the UIA would stand firm. (NOTE. Al-Khateeb, an independent, received the top slot on the Wasit UIA list against the wishes of Wasit SCIRI leadership. Ja'afari has reportedly offered him a ministerial level position in the new government. See reftel. END NOTE.)

¶13. (C) Al-Khateeb, who after the meeting traveled to Baghdad with Wasit Fadilha CoR member Basim Sharif to take part in coalition negotiations, said he supported the idea of a national unity government in principle. However, he pointedly condemned Kurdish attempts to outmaneuver the Shi'a Islamist bloc by forming a coalition of Kurds, Sunnis, and secular CoR representatives. Al-Khateeb insisted that as the holder of the largest bloc of seats in the CoR, the right to form a government lies solely with the UIA. When pressed, Al-Khateeb conceded that the UIA might be required to show some flexibility, including in its choice for the PM slot and named TNA Deputy Speaker Hussein Shahristani as a possible alternative.

¶14. (C) The continued American and Coalition Forces' (CF) presence in Iraq will be a prominent issue in the CoR after a new government is formed, Al-Khateeb offered. He repeatedly asked about withdrawal plans for American and other CF in the course of 2006 and insisted that Iraqi Security Forces were increasingly ready to take over security duties in all parts of the country. While he expressed some understanding for the desire to have the Ministries of Interior and Defense headed by

personnel without sectarian and militia connections, he also described Minister of Interior Jabr as "misunderstood" and criticized U.S. interference in the process of forming an Iraqi government.

¶5. (C) COMMENT. Al-Khateeb, in his last days as Deputy Governor before moving to Baghdad, continues to live up to his unpredictable reputation. While always a nominal--though closely affiliated with SCIRI--independent, his success at the ballot box on December 15 has allowed him to accentuate his independent streak further by supporting Ja'afari. Even if the alleged promise of a ministerial level position does not pan out, Al-Khateeb will continue as a strong independent voice among the Shi'a Islamists in Wasit. END COMMENT

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